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AUTHOR Chilcoat, George; Stahl, Robert J.
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ABSTRACT

The historical understanding that social studies teachers have is diverse. This diversity is explored by providing definitions from various sources, scholars, and pre- and in-service social studies teachers. Questions raised include: (1) what does it mean to understand; (2) what is the meaning of understanding; (3) the additional meanings of understanding; (4) Verstehen: a technical sense of understanding; (5) understanding from the perspective of social studies teachers; (6) understanding in conjunction with comprehension and explanation; and (7) implications of the meaning of understanding for social studies education. Descriptive statements representing goals, objectives, and rationales relative to history were constructed for the purpose of examining the concepts. A ten part "infoschemata" was outlined. Educators and historians have constructed these understandings about the teaching of history around what students or teachers have to do in the classroom and neglect what students can do on their own. (NL)

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UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL STUDIES:
A REVIEW OF THE MEANINGS OF UNDERSTANDING WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR
STUDENT LEARNING AND CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION

George Chilcoat
Social Studies Education
College of Education
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah

and

Robert J. Stahl
Social Studies Education
Arizona State University
Tempe, AZ

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INTRODUCTION

In social studies education, the way understanding is used reveals that it is not a distinct category of thinking or condition but is a quasi-technical term whose meaning is ambiguous even among those who use the word as though it had a particular, consistent meaning. A large majority of social scientists and social studies teachers possess their own idiosyncratic conception of understanding, including 'historical understanding.' This diversity is illustrated throughout this paper in the form of definitions provided by various sources, scholars and pre- and in-service social studies teachers.

The intent of this paper is to provide evidence of the ambiguity of meaning which surrounds one of the most sought after products of social studies instruction -- understanding. Implications of this diversity of meanings on student learning and success are introduced. The paper will conclude with one proposal for revising the ambiguous construct we call understand to include a new conception that is precise, clear and useful for understanding nearly anything social studies educators desire students to understand.

UNDERSTANDING: A SEARCH FOR MEANING

What Does It Mean 'To Understand'

Suppose students were expected 'to understand' particular events, things, and situations being studied or that could be studied. What expectations would teachers have for what these students are to learn and be able to do after all instruction had ended?

If students were to depend upon conventional sources to provide them with a clear, precise definition of what they need to be able to do to acquire and demonstrate understanding, they would likely leave these sources frustrated and even more uncertain, if not confused. Descriptors from definitions from everyday sources such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, and the professional literature are provided below to illustrate what they will find in these sources of what it means *to understand*:

Understanding: Social Studies

- a) to comprehend
- b) to grasp with the mind
- c) to follow the working, logic, meaning of
- d) to take the meaning of (a sign, person, gesture as examples)
- e) to have a sympathetic perception of a person, situation, group, condition
- f) to realize or recognize
- g) to know the meaning of
- h) to interpret as to take to mean
- i) to know how to behave
- j) to assume, to take to be true
- k) to imply
- l) to have knowledge or information that/about
- m) to have been informed
- n) to grasp the meaning of, or to perceive the meaning of as to comprehend (i.e., to comprehend). (e.g., No matter how hard he tried, the student could not understand the events in Tianamen Square during May and June, 1989). ab
- o) to apprehend the meaning or idea of by knowing what is conveyed by the words or the signs used (e.g., to understand the message in code) a
- p) to grasp the reasonable or logical character of a

- q) to interpret or explain successfully to oneself (e.g., I can understand why he was so excited) a
- r) to make clear the speech or message of (e.g., he speaks with such a soft whisper that very few people understand him) a
- s) to have thorough or technical acquaintance with the character of, or to have expertness in the practice of (e.g., being well informed of a period of history is not the same as to understand that period; or to understand the culture of the aborigine) a
- t) to know, consider or accept as a fact, truth, or principle without further mention or explanation or without utter certainty (e.g., to understand that that is the way one must act in that situation) a
- u) to consider as a possible fact, i.e., to infer or come to regard as plausible or probably without certain knowledge or proof, such as to know through rumor, hearsay or innuendo (e.g., we understand that he and not she was the one who committed the murder, or we understand that the Vice President did know about the Contra negotiations) a
- v) to accept as established or laid down as a condition whether or not explicitly stated (e.g., am I to understand that your rejection of my interpretation of this situation is final?) a
- w) to accept as true, to believe
- x) to regard in a particular way or with a particular meaning in mind, such as to interpret in a single one of a number of possible ways (e.g., "by the money price of goods...I understand always the quantity of pure gold and silver for which they are sold" - Adam Smith) a

- y) to supply in thought as if present, such as to take what is meant to be stated even though it is not explicitly stated (e.g., the phrase "to be married" is commonly understood after the word engaged) a
- z) to be familiar with, that is, to recognize from previous knowledge and encounters with (e.g., The explorers encountered a number of new animal and plant forms that they did not previously understand. - archaic form) a
- A) to be thoroughly familiar with such as to apprehend clearly the character, nature or subtleties of (e.g., to understand Stalin, or to understand the timing of the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation). b
- B) to be conversant with words or symbols (e.g., to understand Japanese or Spanish). b
- C) to assign meaning to, such as to interpret (e.g., The Tsar understands the protests as being evidence of rebellion and treason.) b
- D) To know how to conduct (oneself) properly a
- E) to prop up, to support a
- F) to have the use of intellectual faculties, that is to have the power of comprehension a
- G) to achieve a mental grasp of the nature, significance, or causal explanation of something (e.g., "I believe Bob finally understands what we have been saying about the American Civil War", or "I am not convinced by her answers that she understands the Civil War.") and encounters with (e.g., The explorers encountered a number of new animal and plant forms that they did not previously understand. - archaic form) a
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- G) to achieve a mental grasp of the nature, significance, or causal explanation of something (e.g., "I believe Bob finally understands what we have been saying about the American Civil War", or "I am not convinced by her answers that she understands the Civil War.") a
- H) to grasp the significance, implications, or importance of (e.g., "I believe he finally understands the magnitude of the situation."). b
- I) to regard as firmly communicated such that it is agreed upon and settled (e.g., Chrysler Corporation understands that it is to repay the loan within five years). b
- J) to get and have knowledge of, to learn about or hear (e.g., "The President understands that former President Marcos has just died."). b
- K) to show a sympathetic or tolerant or indulgent attitude toward something (e.g., After she had more information, she said she at last understands how the pioneer women felt about their life situations.). a

These definitions describe a wide range of very different expectations translated into very diverse abilities or conditions students would have to attain and then maintain in order *to understand* something. To achieve each requires a different set of information and different set of internal information processing events students must possess or complete.

What is the Meaning of "Understanding"?

Understanding, like *to understand*, is used in a wide variety of scholarly and school situations, typically meaning quite different things to each of those involved. Among the diverse uses and meanings of understanding in school settings we find that understanding consists of:

- a) the act of grasping mentally (e.g, Lincoln claimed he had a clear understanding of the meaning of his decision to end supplies to Fort Sumpter.) a
- b) the ability to understand (i.e., the power of comprehending, analyzing, distinguishing, and judging.) a
- c) the condition of having attained to full comprehension (e.g., Custer's decisions during the early stages of the battle of the Little Big Horn suggests he did not have an understanding of the situation.) a
- d) the faculty or ability of subsuming the particular under the general or of apprehending particulars under appropriate concepts. a
- e) the capacity to formulate and apply to experience concepts and categories to judge, and to draw logical inferences - distinguished from reason. a
- f) a friendly or harmonious relationship (e.g., striving to increase the understanding between the two factions of the Democrat Party) a
- g) an agreement of opinion or feeling or the adjustment of differences between two or more individuals, groups, etc. (e.g, the President reached an understanding with members of the Senate on his foreign aid program.) a
- h) an understood or acknowledged condition, limitation, or provision (e.g., the U.S. government delivered the arms to the rebels on the understanding that they would never be used against the civilian population.) a
- i) possessed of a tolerant, kindly, humane, or sympathetic attitude (e.g., She is a very understanding person.) a

- j) the act or process of comprehension
- k) the taking of something to be true or valid. (e.g., "It is my understanding that you actually saw the UFO land on that field.")

Besides these brief definitions, more elaborate meanings for understandings include the following:

- l) those shared expectations which are the core of culture. This anthropological use refers to the knowledge that people have about each other's behavior and orientations when they share expectations in a common cultural setting. In this sense, culture and 'common understandings' are essentially synonymous. Rose states this meaning clearly in claiming that there is a core of every culture which practically all people in it 'know' and 'understand.' This core includes knowledge about behavior toward other people and about behavior toward certain commonly used objects. There is always a core of common understandings in every culture, and on the basis of these understandings its people have strong expectations most of the time regarding the appropriate behaviors of others. Indeed, the boundaries of a culture are described in terms of the extent of the common understandings which are held and accepted as important regarding how its people can be expected to behave toward one another nearly all of the time.

In this usage, understanding means to have information and a sense of what the culture of a particular group is as its members perceive and practice it to be. Hence, the core culture of the Japanese, Australians, Athenians, and British during the Victorian Era, as examples, as it is perceived and acted out as a set of expected do's and don't's would be the 'common understandings' held by members of each group respectively.

For students 'to understand' or to achieve an 'understanding' of any culture would mean they first acquired the information which make up the 'common understanding' of that culture. Then they would have to develop a sense for adhering to and applying this information in the same way as do members of the culture. While this view of 'understanding' has applications to studying and learning various cultures, its utility is limited to the study of cultures at any moment in time. This view would not be useful for understanding anything else which social studies educators desire students to study.

- m) the level or amount of personal development which one can or has attained as a result of maturation and learning. The learner at birth has no understanding of the past, of his environment or of what is observed and encountered in the world around him. Gradually, as a result of maturation and learning, the child begins to 'understand' what is observed and encountered. Consequently the past, self, and the environment has meaning for and is made meaningful to him. But, as no two learners have the same schemata, the same processing abilities, or the same experiences, no two learners will have the same understanding of an object or situation.
- n) the extent to which one has or has had an affective association with past events, situations or persons. The German notion of an 'intellectual empathy' or 'sympathetic understanding' described below is reiterated here. This conception assumes that understanding goes beyond mere 'knowledge' of and about an event, experience or situation and includes an affective or appreciative view emergent from and fused with this 'knowledge.' IN this view, to understand means that one has an expectation to attain or has attained a sympathetic understanding of something. This meaning would be relevant

were the teacher to expect students to attain an understanding of the farmers in the Great Plain states during the late 1800s or the Australians at Gallipoli.

To have students achieve an understanding from this conception would mean they would need to study past events such that they had sufficient data to 'recreate,' 'relive' or 'reenact' each one, including 'feeling' the emotions and 'thinking the thoughts' of those involved as they would have felt in and experienced these situations. It is in the act of reliving itself that understanding is achieved. Storing and remembering information about this reenactment refers to what one understood about that event as it was lived and experienced.

- o) the extent to which one has an affective or attitudinal association with present or contemporary situations, persons or events. This view is illustrated when an individual claims to 'have an understanding of' the way someone may feel or may 'have an understanding of' a situation or position in which one may find her/himself. For instance, I may claim that "I understand how you must feel." This notion is somewhat similar to that stated in the meaning in the immediately preceding paragraph. However rather than being concerned with the past, the impetus here is a contemporary or possible future scenario and accentuates the affect elements in the experiencing or in the situation. In addition, this notion of understanding does not demand the quantity of contextual data needed to reenact the event or experience as 'intellectual empathy' requires.
- p) the process by which one recognizes or invites relationships among things which are meaningful to that person. It involves more than comprehending, knowing, and imagining. This process makes the person deal with a thing in terms of its known or perceived connections, associations or relations with other things. It occurs when a person acknowledges, for example, that he or she

knows what he or she can or cannot do. In doing this, a particular relationship, in this case, relationships between the person and what s/he wants or needs to do, is constructed and acknowledged although not always publicly.

In social studies classrooms learners would attend to, note, infer or invent meaningful associations or connections between two or more things with each connection achieving greater understanding of the things being considered.

- q) the process whereby individuals assign different meaning to the same thing according to the new ways in which they perceive its worth, function, or use in a particular context, often reflecting a new way in which they are prepared to act toward or with the thing in a particular situation. "Understanding is to be taken here in the broad sense of *meaning something*, anything, to the organism. It implies the absence of indifference [toward what is to be understood]." For instance, the value of a dollar is not likely to be understood by a child as an adult understands it. She builds toward and may acquire an understanding of a dollar as the adult does, after earning, spending, and saving dollars herself over a period of time. In this example she comes to understand the same thing (i.e., a dollar), but in a different way than before. A dollar comes to possess new meanings to her. In this sense, understanding involves seeking and acquiring new and enhanced meanings for the same thing; meanings that represent a more sophisticated or more valid sense of what something is than what one held earlier in life.

Applying this view to social studies instruction, students, with limited or inadequate conceptual frameworks and information, could come to understand an event as an historian, sociologist, or geographer *understands* it or as a person who

actually experienced a situation firsthand understands it. In other words, a novice's early 'understanding' is something quite different from that of an expert's of a more well-informed learner. This is largely due to the meanings assigned over time as well as different levels of meaningfulness of their accumulated information base of their common interest.

In social studies classrooms students need to acquire and learn to use perspectives, concepts, methods of inquiry, and criteria of the social and behavioral sciences to examine, analyze, and interpret issues, events, materials and situations over time. They are expected to become sophisticated in their thinking, perspectives and orientations about these subjects rather than become possessors of large quantities of almost fragmented infobits just so that they have these data.

- r) the results of role-taking activities that enables us to find meaning in what is acted out. This direct observational understanding of the subjective meaning of a particular act as such, and this includes verbal utterances and non-verbal expressions.
- s) the result of perceiving observed actions as part of a larger set of social acts in which people as actors are engaged and involved.
- t) the methodological device (or the results of the use thereof) using an ideal type construct in order to study and generate scientifically adequate, tested accounts of social action. Here individuals obtain verifiable, accurate interpretations of the meaning of a phenomenon that consist of both the directly understandable and non-understandable components of behavior. To be successful in understanding something, the person would develop an ideal type construct which then is used to analyze the phenomenon in a systematic way. An analysis without this construct would be merely a plausible explanation or interpretation.

These twenty definitions represent only a sampling of those found in the literature on understanding which are likely to be available to social studies teachers and students. The language of understanding is neither clearer nor more precise than that for describing what it means to understand.

Additional ordinary meanings of understand and understanding

The lack of clarity in meaning is increased when we consider common ordinary use meanings of understanding and to understand. A sample of these meanings are provided below:

- a) the person has some 'knowledge' of something, 'know' how it works, or 'know' what it means. Examples of this meaning include: "I believe he has a real understanding of the First Amendment," and "To be successful requires that she has a full understanding of how a bill becomes a law." This conception essentially equates understanding as having (and usually being able to recall when needed) quantities of the appropriate information relative to some thing which someone perceives as being necessary and sufficient to recall for understanding to be attained. For example, a person might say "You showed me you understand when you told me that..."

Carried into the social studies classroom, this notion would mean that students would study, acquire and be able to recall quantities of particular types of information concerning some event, situation, or entity. The criteria for how much and what kinds of information they need to 'have understanding' would typically be established by the teacher for the particular thing being understood. In many situations the criteria for what constitutes understanding 'float' in that they vary from topic to topic and sometimes even from student to student for the same topic.

- b) the person is or has been empathetic, accepting and perhaps even forgiving of another person, action or thing. For instance: "The President's actions showed understanding of the plight of the protestors," "Your students are always telling me *how understanding* you are as a teacher," or "During the entire four days following the assassination of her husband, Jackie Kennedy showed great presence in understanding of the situation."
- c) the relationship between two or more individuals or groups based upon the extent of information they have about each other makes it possible for a great deal of friendship and trust to exist between them. For instance: "Without a great deal of understanding between the general and the Indian chief, no peace treaty would have been signed," or "Before the two sides can work together productively, we must first create *greater understanding between* them."
- d) the informal agreement between individuals or groups about something in particular. For instance: "A tacit understanding had been reached among the three parties involved in the negotiations." This conception of understanding would be applicable when examining the relationship between or among individuals, groups or nations as they interact(ed) with one another. For instance, students might study the events and occasion of the Munich Conference or the Yalta Conference to determine the extent of the understanding that had been reached between Hitler and Chamberlain or among Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt in addition to the more formal agreements that had been reached.
- e) the decision that is made on the assumption that something specific in another area will be done. For instance: "Robert E. Lee resigned his commission in the United States Army *on the understanding that* he would be appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Confederate Army."

In addition to the examples, Table 1 provides a set of phrases from statements individuals express relative to their understanding of a particular thing. It should be noted that each of these instances make reference to a particular category of information that represents what that person senses is necessary for understanding. In effect, what the expression suggests is that it is in having or getting the particular type of information that makes understanding possible. It should also be noted that many of the definitions cited throughout this paper are congruent with one or more of these categories of information in Table 1.

Verstehen: A 'technical sense' of understanding

A new conception of 'understanding' was introduced into historiography in the late 1800s by German scholars, primarily through the writings of Draysen and Dilthy. For these scholars, *Verstehen* (i.e., 'intellectual empathy' or 'empathetic understanding') involved the historian relating with empathy with past situations, people(s) and events such that the historian 'relives' or 'reenacts' these events as best he/she could do so. This conception represented a far more technical meaning for understanding than existed before (and since) its introduction.

In their view, *understanding* was a method rather than a condition: that is, it was a way of achieving an end (i.e., reliving or reenacting) rather than being a state of being. *Verstehen* was a cognitive procedure one could learn and cold apply -- a procedure based on the human capability for being able to intellectually empathize with people in particular situations. Using this conception, a person would first use the methods of scholarly study and inquiry to acquire and comprehend quantities of sufficient details an event or situation so that she or he could "relive" the event in the same cognitive and affective way as might those who were actually there.

Understanding, unlike *explanation*, was not perceived as being strictly a logical, objective, rational process. Rather it was primarily a subjective, emotional and

intuitive experience within which the individual established 'psychological and emotional rapport' with the event, people and situation being studied.

These scholars assumed that through this rapport and personal involvement, one could 'internalize' any past event via his/her imagining what emotions may have been aroused at the time by individuals actually involved in and affected by the event as it happened. By 'absorbing' and becoming deeply involved in vast amounts of information about a particular event in the past, the individual could intuitively enter into an empathetic relationship with the event and its people, thereby making it possible to some extent to actually 'experience' that event and 'think' the thoughts and 'feel' the emotions of those people involved in that situation.

In the early 1900s, *Verstehen* was very popular in Germany and throughout Europe and was accepted among large numbers of British and American historians. In the United States, the conception of an 'intellectual empathy' with others and with the past was usually associated with historical relativism. Weber made this conception a major tenet in his method of concept formation, especially his method involving the construction and application of ideal type concepts. Croce and Collingwood also used this notion in varying degrees in their respective approaches to history.

After 1945, the original conception of *Verstehen* lost much of its support, in part because of scholarly assertions, especially among American and British social scientists, that its basic assumptions and focus were totally inappropriate, if not invalid. Most social scientists rejected its use or merely ignored it.

However a *neo-Verstehen* perspective emerged that has a number of adherents among American historians. An example of this position is illustrated by Higham, who asserted that "No amount of scientific analysis or synthesis can take the place of that crucial act of human empathy by which the historian identifies himself with

another time and place, reenacting the thoughts and reliving the experience of people remote from himself."

'Understanding' From the Perspective of Social Studies Teachers

What is the conception of understanding from the point of view of those who actually have the primary responsibilities of planning curriculum for understanding, helping students to attain understanding, monitoring for understanding, and assessing the extent to which students acquire understanding?

Data were collected over a period of two years from pre- and in- service social studies teachers enrolled in undergraduate and graduate courses at Arizona State University and the University of Texas at Arlington. These teachers completed an open ended questionnaire which included a request for their definitions of comprehension, understanding, knowledge, knowing, and four other terms associated with thinking and learning. Representative samples of the definitions reported are provided below.

a) definitions for understanding

- grasping the meaning of a concept,
- having a through idea of the issue,
- the process of receiving information and being able to translate that information into the meaning which was intended by the teacher,
- occurs after you receive the information and its meaning is clear,
- the process whereby new information is added to old information and they make sense either together or separately,
- essentially the same meaning as for comprehension,
- is what students get from an activity or situation,

- it is the base level of learning that is obtained after an activity or experience,
- to know how something works or how it affects us,
- to be able to use the information learned,
- the ability to connect the underlying principles that govern concepts and facts with those concepts and facts,
- a superficial comprehension of the workings of,
- grasping the meaning of,
- making sense out of material,
- existing ability to comprehend something,
- knowing the true meaning of a particular piece of information,
- being able to process a thought in a manner at which the thought was meant for,
- to know, comprehend well enough to demonstrate and explain to others.

b) definitions for comprehension

- the ability of understanding material
- an understanding of something on a level of sufficient depth,
- mental understanding of information which is presented; involves internal processing of information,
- understanding the meaning, relevance, and significance of particular components of a broad range of knowledge,
- is when students take the information at the understanding level and apply it to different knowledge,
- a state of understanding a concept,

- being at the point where you completely understand and the use of material,
- understanding,
- understanding material so that it makes sense to the person,
- understanding information one is subjected to,
- actively seeing and understanding,
- being able to understand fact,
- assimilating understanding.

These representative teacher definitions illustrate the diversity of notions which exist about what it means to understand. They also can be used to point out our claim that what it means to understand is not consistent across teachers so that students can 'transfer' their conception of understanding from teacher to teacher even when these teachers are teaching in the same area. Imagine what students would need to do to be successful in understanding or comprehending in classrooms where these definitions prevailed and served as the criteria for determining how successful students were in understanding or comprehending.

Understanding in conjunction with comprehension and explanation

A common conception equates understanding with comprehension or knowing. Understand, understanding and comprehend are very often interchangeable. For very wide and general concepts understand is more likely to be used than comprehend. Understand is generally perceived as being wider in its meaning and use, ranging from the mere physical act of sensory perception or very casual consideration to a full and profound realization of inner nature, rationale, or significance. Comprehension is also thought to focus attention on thought processes rather than their conclusions.

Another notion links understanding with or use it as a synonym for *explanation*. *Understanding*, as a synonym for explanation, usually refers to (a) the logical method

by which a person makes (or tries to make) something that has happened, is happening, or that is being considered clear and comprehensible to others, (b) a condition or state of being which has been achieved as a result of the logical procedures of inferences, interpretations and explanations, or (c) the process of attaining this condition or state of being. Levic has asserted that the proper location of understanding is as a superordinate category under which other separate logical processes such as interpretation and explanation are subsumed.

However, while understanding is often associated with explanation, explanation is far less frequently defined in terms of understanding. Rather, the word explanation is typically used for any time a person has to clearly state a description of an event, action or activity about which there are a number of facts which must be addressed and included. An explanation can also be the verbal statement which results from this effort to describe and make comprehensible an event, situation or activity.

As the above sections make clear, there is no agreement even among scholars in one discipline as to a precise, consistent meaning of understanding, much less clear description of its relationship to other constructs of cognition such as explanation, description, interpretation, and comprehension. There is certainly no agreement among social studies educators as to what understanding means. What it means to understand is so nebulous that we should question its very use in school settings where the success or failure of students hinges upon their attaining something that is not clear or consistent for their teachers.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE MEANING OF UNDERSTANDING FOR SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION

The concern of the authors in this investigation has been the students who enroll in social studies classrooms. It is these individuals who are assigned the task of understanding what is studied in these courses and to be successful in that

understanding endeavor. They are the ones who must not only attain understanding, but give evidence of that attainment as they respond to questions during discussions, answer test items, and complete worksheets and other assignments designed to help them understand.

We therefore propose a brief scenario of what it is like for students in the typical social studies classroom who want to be successful at understanding what they are studying.

As the above descriptors and definitions reveal, all is not clear for learners as to what constitutes 'understanding' what they study in school settings. The wide range of definitions and examples is indicative of the ambiguity and uncertainty that surrounds the meaning understanding. Whether using scholarly definitions, ordinary usage descriptors, or definitions from pre- and in-service teachers, it is plain to see that little agreement exists among users of the term understanding as to what it means 'to understand' and 'to have understanding.'

The implications of this ambiguity and lack of agreement for student learning and success are numerous. Unless students are certain as to the particular (type of) understanding they are to attain, they are likely to attend to, acquire, and consider inappropriate information and then process it in inappropriate ways. These decisions as to infobits and processing are consistent with what each student 'thought' his or her teacher meant by understanding. In a very real sense, students now are forced to guess what their teachers probably mean by the term understanding each time they are directed 'to understand' some particular thing. Those that guess right often enough are successful; those that are wrong too often find it safer to quit trying than to try and be continually frustrated for their failure. These failures may have nothing to do with what they understand and much to do with their inability to figure out the criteria their teacher uses to assess their learning.

The curriculum and the social studies teacher should avoid establishing and maintaining ambiguous learning environments relative to helping students to understand what they are studying. Rather the teachers' task, is to make clear for students precisely what it means to understand particular events, things or situations selected for students to understand. Only by providing such clarity are most students most of the time likely to focus their learning efforts to understand in the way the teacher actually expects them to understand and much to do with their inability to figure out the criteria their teacher uses to assess their learning.

The curriculum and the social studies teacher should avoid establishing and maintaining ambiguous learning environments relative to helping students to understand particular events, things or situations selected for students to understand. Only by providing such clarity are most students most of the time likely to focus their learning efforts to understand in the way the teacher actually expects them to understand.

A First Step.

It is our belief that schools should be operated to increase the success of every learner and that the ambiguity of the language relative to different types of learning contribute to the failure of many students who would otherwise be successful. We also believe that understanding, like knowledge, knowing, comprehending, thinking, and learning, is a man-made construct -- that is, it is an invention of human to describe and explain particular things that we 'think' actually exist or can be attained inside the human brain. As a construct, its boundaries, characteristics and uses were invented and can be attained inside the human brain. As a construct, its boundaries, characteristics and uses were invented and can be modified or replaced. We propose that the construct of understanding has, at present, so many diverse characteristics and uses that its uses in educational settings are dysfunctional to students to success

as well as to instructional clarity and focus. What is needed is a new set of parameters and descriptors so that the meaning of understanding makes understanding a useful construct for guiding and assessing understanding in the social studies classroom.

A first step toward helping students become successful in understanding would be to reach agreement on what it means to understand and to understanding. A set of operational definitions and a framework which includes specific requirements for what constitutes 'understanding' are provided in the accompanying paper. The proposed model of understanding for social studies settings is practical, learnable and teachable. Furthermore, it can be used to help students develop a highly useable and transferable schema which they can apply to guide their 'thinking for understanding' regarding any thing they want to understand.

Our intent in this paper was not to explore the curriculum and instructional issues of assisting students to attain understanding. Nor did we intend on analyzing understanding from a philosophical perspective. We were concerned with making clear the nature and extent of the ambiguity of the language concerning understanding and the implications of this ambiguity on the quality of student thinking and learning. We believe we were successful in accomplishing our intents.